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Six Steps to the Greenest Meetings Possible

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The average conference leaves in its wake piles of plastic name badges, resting upon hundreds of plastic water bottles, disposable cups, plates and plastic utensils. At the end of many events, the floors and hotel rooms are scattered with pages and pages of printed brochures and handouts on virgin paper, not to mention promotional goodies like plastic pens, mouse pads and magnets. If the venue does not have a strong recycling program, all this is taken to the landfill or incinerator.

The reality is that a meeting impacts the environment in a number of ways, including the greenhouse gases emitted during travel, electricity and water consumed during the events and hotel stays, paper used in brochures and handouts, materials and energy used for meals and promotional giveaways, and waste and greenhouse gas emissions associated with plastic water bottles.

If your company has made a commitment to green, it should extend to your meetings and other events.

What Makes a Meeting Green?

The Green Events Source Book defines a green meeting as one that "incorporates environmental considerations throughout all stages in order to minimize the negative impact on the environment." I have heard others define a green meeting as no meeting at all.

Having no meeting at all, though, is not always an option, so when a face-to-face gathering is necessary, the following six best practices will get you on the right track to greening your event.

Most are cost-neutral, while some will even result in cost savings. Johanna Walsh, CEO and eco-event planner at Twirl Management, sees more cost trades than cost increases. For example, by providing beverages in bulk you can cut your costs by nearly 30 percent, freeing up funds to pay for a shuttle from a public transit hub to the event.

The Six Steps to Green Meetings

1. Location, Location, Location: Pick a Green City and Venue
2. Ban Plastic Water Bottles
3. Reduce Use of Virgin Paper and Minimize Waste
4. Eat Local and Organic
5. Engage the Local Community
6. Go Carbon Neutral

1. Location, Location, Location: Pick a Green City and Venue

The majority of an event's carbon footprint (over 80 percent) will come from air travel. Therefore, the easiest way to reduce your footprint is to locate the event as close as possible to your participants.

Reducing waste and integrating recycling into your event will be much easier if you select a city that has a strong recycling program, and ideally a composting program as well. Two resources to help identify greener cities are listings put together by Popular Science and SustainLane.

Once you have selected your location, the next strategic choice is to select a green venue that integrates key sustainability practices. Unfortunately, there is no one comprehensive source that ranks and lists green hotels. For greener venues, Tamara Kennedy-Hill, Executive Director of the [Green Meeting Industry Council](#) recommends the listing of [Green Seal Lodging](#). However, at this time the list only includes 20 properties.

If available, select a hotel with LEED certification, which ensures that the facility has been evaluated for energy efficiency, water savings, materials use and other sustainability-related criteria. In California, the [Orchard Garden Hotel](#) and the [Gaia Napa Valley](#) are LEED certified. The new green lodge and conference facility, [Cavallo Point: The Lodge at the Golden Gate](#), is pursuing LEED certification and, through the [Institute at the Golden Gate](#), provides a reduced rate to qualified non-profits.

Another option is to ask hotels to complete a questionnaire or add environmental criteria as part of your request for proposals (RFP). The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) has a 14-point check list that details key questions to ask. [BlueGreen Meetings](#) and The National Recycling Coalition's [Green Meetings Policy](#) provide model contract language and a checklist you can use in your RFP.

At a minimum, be sure the venue you select has a strong recycling program that includes clear signage -- you would be surprised how few hotels have a good system for recycling at events. Be sure to include recycling requirements, and other key environmental needs, in your contract.

2. Ban Plastic Water Bottles

"Eliminating plastic water bottles is one of the quickest and simplest ways to green your event." according to Noelle Ferdon, senior organizer at Food and Water Watch, Serve drinking water in pitchers or at water stations, reducing your carbon footprint and the amount of waste produced.

Food and Water Watch offers a resource to help you plan a bottle-free event called [Free Your Event From Bottled Water](#). [U.S. Pure Water](#) can help organizations set-up filtered water stations.

3. Reduce Use of Virgin Paper and Minimize Waste

Another simple step is to work with conference planners, participants and exhibitors to print all materials on 100 percent post-consumer waste (PCW) recycled paper or to provide program guides and handouts electronically.

To minimize waste, work with the hotel to implement an effective recycling program with well-placed receptacles and effective signage. If possible, have the waste diverted from the landfill weighed so you can track the benefits of your program.

If you really want to go for it, plan a zero waste event. By selecting a venue that provides a complete recycling and composting program, and by communicating with vendors and attendees about what materials to avoid, you can easily create a zero waste event.

Reduce your footprint even more by selecting giveaways that are non-toxic and made of recycled materials or organic cotton (see [Nexus Collections Limited](#) and [Eco Imprints](#)). Or better yet, don't provide any giveaways, and minimize the environmental impacts associated with materials production and transport.

4. Eat Local and Organic

If your budget allows, another way to minimize your carbon footprint is to ask your caterer to serve organic and local food and to use reusable dishes, glasses and linens. If reusable isn't an option, request compostable items such as utensils made out of corn starch. Avoid boxed lunches whenever possible.

5. Engage the Local Community

Consider setting aside an afternoon or morning for event participants to volunteer for community service or to participate in some activity that gives back to the local community. At the Green Meeting Industry Council meeting in Vancouver earlier this year, participants had the option to volunteer at the local food bank and the event quickly filled up to capacity.

A recent post on the GreenBiz [LinkedIn](#) discussion board on green events, a participant commented, "Our biggest learning continues to be proactively engaging local non-profit/community-based organizations in exhibiting and participating in the event. We support local groups through waived/reduced exhibitor fees and, in some cases, modest grants to assist with their expenses in participating."

6. Go Carbon Neutral

You have done everything you can do minimize your footprint, the next step is to offset your remaining footprint and make your event carbon neutral.

Based on my research, [TerraPass](#), [Carbonfund.org](#), [Sustainable Travel International](#) and [Native Energy](#) are some of the top organizations that provide event calculators and high-quality offsets. Use one of the calculators to estimate the amount of carbon dioxide created by your event and include the cost to offset the event in the registration fee or budget.

Resources for Greening Your Meetings

- [Green Meeting Industry Council](#)
- [Green Lodging News](#)
- [Green Event Source](#)
- [US Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [BlueGreen Meetings](#)
- [Simple Steps to Green Meetings and Events](#)
- [Green Seal](#)

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